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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 26 December 1982

MEDITATION, MYSTICISM AND CH'AN

I would like at this point to speak about Ch'an and mysticism. Ch'an is something which started in China not in India. Many people have the misunderstanding that Ch'an and meditation are the same thing, Ch'an is meditation, and meditation is Ch'an. This is not the case. Ch'an is actually the stage at which one has already gone through the various levels of meditation experience, but finally transcends these stages. Only this can be said to be Ch'an. If one only practices meditation, and does not transcend the meditation state, then one can at most remain at a stage in which the mind is unified and unchanging. If a person at this stage were to enter the dynamic, changing world then he would very likely lose this meditation state and enter the deluded state of mind. If one wishes to enter into and also maintain such a meditation state then it is necessary to continuously practice, and it is best to remove oneself from the world of everyday affairs and go into the mountains to practice. Otherwise, in his involvement with daily human interactions he will easily lose touch with this meditation state. However, even after having lost the ability to uninterruptedly maintain this state he will already be a different person by virtue of having once experienced it. He would tend to be more stable than others and would have a better understanding of the world than those who have never experienced this meditation state. Most people would call this person a man of wisdom.

But the practice of Ch'an is something different. Initially one's mind reaches a very concentrated or unified state. Then this concentrated mind breaks apart or disappears. At this time the mind will not easily return to its original scattered state, because the mind no longer exists. However, after a certain period of time this person may again return to the deluded state. In my description of the stages of practice I usually speak first of going from a scattered mind to a unified, concentrated state of mind. This is the meditation state. But the final stage is reached when even this mind disappears. This is called Ch'an. In the meditation practice, even the unified state of mind is still considered as a kind of attachment, attachment to a large self as opposed to our normal small or narrow self.

In the meditation state the self is limitless and unbounded, but, nevertheless there is still a center to which we are attached. Because of this attachment one makes a clear distinction between the real and the unreal. Frequently, religious figures say that what they see or say is the truth, whereas what others say is false. These types of statements are based upon a person's religious experiences and the convictions which stem from them. In their experience there is a very clear separation between the real and the unreal. This person will often feel that he has left the false world and entered into a truer, more real kind of world. A feeling of opposition to this false world arises as this person has no wish to return to his previous state and wishes to remain in this truer state. So in this struggle to reject the false and cling to the real a kind of friction develops between these opposing worlds.

In Ch'an there is no real world and no false world. There is no bias towards the real or rejection of the unreal. Ch'an encompasses the totality of the real and the unreal, they are equal and not different. Thus in the Ch'an sect there are many koans which seem paradoxical or illogical from the ordinary point of view. This is one of the special characteristics of the Ch'an sect. I myself have a saying I often remind my students of, "Birds are swimming deep under the ocean, fish are flying high in the sky." Is this nonsense? Actually it's very simple. Birds and fish are originally without names, why not call birds fish? Also, our lives are simply the way they are. What is wrong with them? What need is there to search after some real world? Why do we insist on seeing the world as confused and unhappy?

Each individual existence is reality, the existence of every object is reality. Reality is not and should not be separate from illusory phenomena. Ch'an transcends the ordinary and then returns to the ordinary world. But, still we cannot say that we all understand what Ch'an is. This would be a deception. First one must practice to attain a unified, concentrated state of mind, and then throw this state of mind away and return to the ordinary world. At this stage one is truly liberated and free while at the same time actively participating in the world. To use an analogy, ordinarily one sees mountains and water as mountains and water. Next the practitioner reaches a state where mountains are no longer mountains and water is no longer water. They have changed. Finally, this state is transcended and we again see mountains and water as part of the ordinary world.

So in the comparison of Ch'an and mysticism we may say that the Ch'an practitioner goes through the stages of mystic experience but Ch'an itself is not mysticism, it is stable, ordinary life. Actually, the mysticism spoken of in the classroom is not what I regard as genuine mysticism. Most people who speak of mysticism do so from an academic or theoretical standpoint. They themselves have never experienced a mystical state and therefore regard such a state as strange and extraordinary. Perhaps when one first begins to practice meditation, or possibly through the practice of other religious disciplines, one may have such an experience. At this point one would feel their state to be different from their ordinary, practical life. But, their experience is still not complete and their understanding of this so called mystical state is still vague and not totally clear. One still regards the experience as mystical and strange.

However, when one deeply experiences the state of the unified mind or has the experience of Ch'an, this experience is not viewed as strange or extraordinary. On the contrary, that which is experienced is seen as real and true, there is nothing mystical about it. It is simply normal, ordinary life. Therefore, from this standpoint, one may say that the world as common, deluded people see it could be considered strange or mystical, while the world as one with a mind which has reached a unified state or attained the state of Ch'an could be seen as the true, ordinary, normal world. Actually, from my point of view, I would say that there is no mysticism at all!

Excerpt from lecture given by Master
Sheng Yen on November 22, 1982 for the
Religious Mysticism class at N.Y.U.

NEWS ITEMS

November 22, Shih-fu lectured at N.Y.U. on "Meditation, Mysticism and Ch'an."

December 6, Shih-fu spoke at Rutgers University on the stages of meditation for students of the Meditation Club.

December 8, Shih-fu talked at New School on the history of Ch'an Buddhism.

December 12, Shih-fu appeared on WBAI Radio and spoke on the "Essence of Mind."

Thursday evenings a class is being taught on Yogacara (Consciousness Only) Buddhism. Those interested should contact the Center.

Kuo Hsien Shih has successfully completed the month long ordination ceremony for taking the Bhiksuni precepts. Also taking part in the ceremony were three other bhiksunis from western countries.

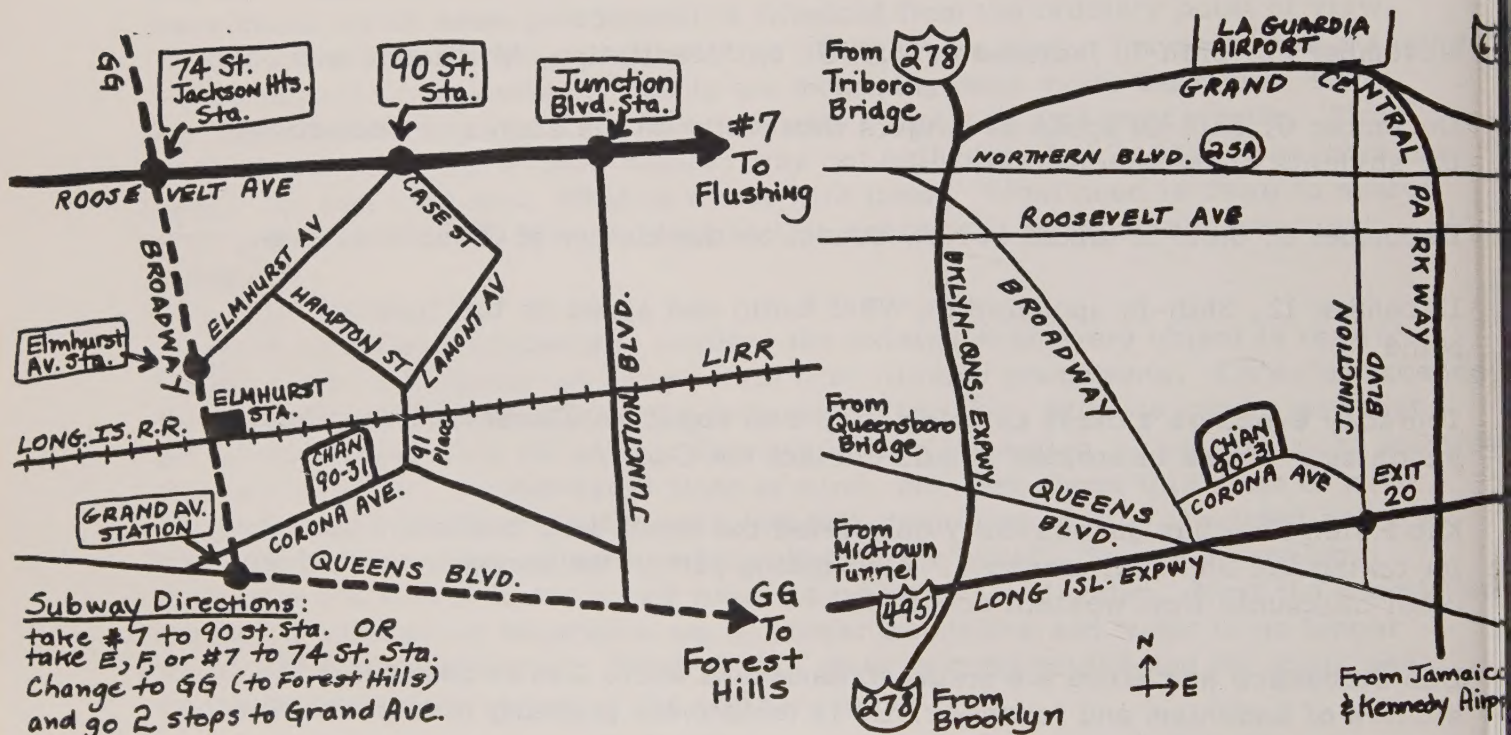
Dan Stevenson and Miwa are living in Kamakura where Dan is continuing his studies of Buddhism and Japanese. He is tentatively planning to return to New York in late Spring.

November 26, Teresa Lovewell and her husband Mark came from Boston so that Shih-fu could bless their new child. On December 3 Bob Lenox brought his son Marlon to the Center to receive Shih-fu's blessing.

The second issue of Jen Sheng (Humanity) magazine has been published. This is an independent Chinese-language magazine which Shih-fu has started in Taiwan.

The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.



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